*Rites*

2554 1952

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Rite One

Killing

*I stood, holding my breath,*

*in urine-scented hay,*

*master of life and death*

* *Gwen Harwood, ‘Barn Owl’*

Excision

She lies unopened

under light which breaks bone white

on metal and thin

wrists.

The obstetrician establishes herself

the spider of midwives –

the underbody of hands, hands, hands

spins gossamer and sweeps sweat,

directives from the white-gloved queen.

The gown is wound up –

to reveal a new gravity,

now the room revolves in stasis

around the sebaceous globe:

red line through her equator.

Each moment, this round rise and fall

compels the room to act.

This god in utero

heaves untouched

unclaimed in swollen waters.

* relieved instantaneously

as they descend on peach-ripe flesh.

It is plucked, red and wet

a bird

flensed and featherless.

Exposed, the membrane

deliquesces in air - contact dissolves

lace memory in the real:

waters breach the hive.

We cross the Styx:

she leaks, lingers –

compass eye

revolving slow and wild

for True north.

A wave lips her mouth;

white sheet.

The workers depart.

The Queen stares thinly,

her image returned by her son

on the other side.

In retreat, you distil a final image

through the purdah:

the elegant arch of her

lurch for air.

~

Your dream leaves without a mark, sand and absent wave. Clear morning spills onto the earth like sun. The coffee steams in your hands, offered demurely – like flowers – into the lake of cold air.

There is a newness of self in the detachment of morning. It dissolves yesterday in the backwash of sleep, softens the edged-realism of the day ahead. Kookaburras burst from the trees and pluck the air like strings.

You let yourself soak as you drift across the grass, and jump the fence to the paddock.

The first time you saw blood it was redder than you expected. It stank of thick earth and acid. It was bitter and full-bodied in the air, sitting on your tongue like metal. Mouthguards and mud memories recover in the taste. A tooth jammed in the soft of your gum. Oranges and victory.You and Dad are midwives, holding down the cow’s fatted flesh, slickening under her sweat. Rain leaks through the roof and the heat from her body steams the place acrid. A clean cry. Dad picks up the tiny, limby life blanched in vernix. He turns it in his hands and sweeps off the red. It makes you feel small, awed – seeing something so private. Like stripping back the world and seeing its naked cogs and pistons and sweat, panting in the back room. It’s alien and human and hymen flooding in all at once; an unnameable christening. Sitting stiff in muddy pyjamas the night gives you a speck, which you swallow and grow around like a pearl.

The memory slips. The mother pants, she is tired. Like yours. An ingrown vacancy that sips and shuffles through hallways.

Circular doors. Her void grew you like grit. You embalmed your sore skin against her, more and more fibres against her absence until you were your own small white pearl; quite without her.

Night comes, and the porch lamp lights the house up orange. Flickers, and makes everything swim in its aquarium light. Inside sits a vase of plastic flowers. They don’t bother to fill it up with water any more, it just sits - crayon yellow and white – artlessly counterfeit.

The sky is suspended aubergine as you walk inside. Splayed out flesh-wise, and yet you’re the one feeling etherised. The view of the pasture reminds you of how Dad used to take you out in the afternoons. Nothing would be said, but he’d walk behind and catch your doe-eyed stumbles. A clumsy love that fit into absences; the worn out soles of your shoes repaired one morning, blankets drawn up. Loved and owned and owned.

They met at a barbecue - sky and grass like browned apple. They fermented into each other, and drew themselves out into the evening in cider sips of conversation. Slivers of fruit that they held onto with their tongues and pretended were crisp.

Then they found strength in whole things; a truck, a blue heeler, a son to raise. Assembled the parts of their wholes into a patchwork, and stitched them tentatively with glances and dates down at the cinema and long bottles of red. Half because he secretly felt the shameful state of being in your 30s and without a wife and kids to count. And his mates’ ribbings of bachelorhood were rubbing a little more raw and final each time. So when Angela came, it was it – might as well be.

Then they slowly folded themselves away again. Made dry love like two insects caught shuddering in a death roll. The room stank of gin. The fan on the ceiling clocked their sex act frame-by-frame.

You didn’t sleep, waiting for the police to find Dad one night. Saw him on your way to school the next day slumped outside a bar, a brown paper bag full of God. Picked him up and stumbled home like those days in the grass – pacified him with aspirin and sleep. And in the sinews of his arms he was still invincible. He was a hot stone that had to cool on a couch for a day, ailed by some fictional ill, but with strength in his laugh or soft explanation.

~

You lay in bed one night as heat died at the fly-screen and sank, dry, into the room. In the hallway, fluorescent lights whispered bright in the dark and stained the womb-red of your eyes when you closed them. Yellowy inverse images that grew in nothingness, and lost form under focus.

You peered around the door. Dad was lofted asleep in a chair, awash in the tidal light of the television. It felt strange to see him unaware - without the hard acreage of his gaze, his fastidiousness of movement.

You wrapped the doona around you and made your way out the front door. Stood for a while, listening to the vinyl crackle of heat and crickets. You were safe in a blanket submarine, periscoping your vision through a gap. You stayed until your eyes could pick out branches, impressionist in the fabric of the dark.

As the sounds grew mute in their constancy, you heard life across the field. You picked your way over, each pothole and clump known to you, in the way you situate your limbs without looking. Each place linked in spatial presence to each other – the waft of manure and quiet from the stables preceding the flickering of the chicken pen, preceding the old horse who broke your arms, preceding the edge of the farm and the black line of trees beyond.

A yard over, the door to the calf pen was unlatched like you left it. The night before came back in a dream, as you passed over the stench of piss near the door to the must of straw and animal. You ran your hands over the cumulus of flesh till you found the smallest, tucked under the heat of his mother. Pulled him into your lap and felt his warmth and fat on your chest.

A flashlight breached the dark and swept the room. The bulk of his silhouette was backlit by the ash light of the early morning.

* “Jesus Christ.”

Words broke wet with relief.

“What?”

“You weren’t in bed.”

The calf nudged the bottle of milk hidden behind you with its nose, and rolled it into the open. He switched off the light, and a sigh made its way over from where he was standing.

“You’re still getting up early.”

“Yep.”

The sigh slipped back out into the night.

~

*Father and child, we stand*

*in time’s long-promised land.*

* + *Gwen Harwood, ‘Nightfall’*

Abattoir

The grass is thickest bordering the slaughterhouse. It sits like black pudding; thawing and throbbing on the edge of your vision. The smell permeates.

Your dad slowly walks round the front of the cow. Soft, proud steps. He is the doctor, and you are the doctor’s son. He goes quiet for a moment and sticks out his tongue in concentration.

The bolt strikes clean through the skull. There’s not much blood.

He checks for a pulse, and then shows you the hole-puncher wound in the papery flesh of its head.

There is very little else, apart from that wound. There’s no alien tone of a heart monitor or gush of blood. Like a switch – binary. One is breathing and zero is not, all quick, all painless.

Do parents know this, as they watch a child simulate life on a hospital bed? Maybe they think if they suspend the illusion long enough, the world will make a mistake. Screw up its wiring and accidentally switch back on the one – now he is *breathing¸* not just a mound of skeleton flesh and circuitry. It is a question, though. Whether the world runs so binary-like. Does it exist in the eighths, or the quarters? Do our thoughts and imaginings live there in the half formed rooms? And if so – doesn’t the cardinal stuff, the real grit of life, sit square in the non-binary?

And yet, breathing or not breathing doesn’t leave much room for negotiation.

Before your dad, it was a cow. Now it is a head, a rib, a cut. Anatomically, we break it down – the named privilege of life – so it is suddenly ownable; this is *my* flank, *my* side, *my* flesh.

This was my child’s room, and first toy, and these are the last words he could no longer retain.

And in these bones of assembly, the final figure seems so clear; easy to complete.

Now it is your time to own: the instrument of tenure is handle-first toward you.

~

*Man cannot remake himself without suffering, for he is both the marble and the sculptor.*

* *Alexis Carrel*

Sloughing

A crop, a knife, a flail

restrained in a rack.

Your inheritance.

Your father stands scalpel handed:

sets to work,

self-portrait.

Cleave him off,

moult lingers – and threatens the split

the overgrown lips, slick

labium of boyhood

biting for grip.

It froths at

its imminent catabolism.

The slow infant mercury

lazes a path behind.

You are a snake: your magnitude

a carcass of skin

stretching ten, twenty, thirty years

* a cathedral train.

He waits for your return,

and joins the others.

Lined up as rejected dolls; they catch

the next to fall,

sand-bags cut from a balloon.

The magnesium rite:

you blaze in water

you burn in air

Eve kicks the snake

and you eat it happily;

Ouroboros growth.

You leave the garden.

The jaw is waiting:

the white cuff of starch

the clean strike of a palm.

To roll people like cigarettes

rule land with the clip of a word

chew sun and time as wheat.

Trace the column of spine –

the heat of the calf is soft milk.

Move your thumb over her lips,

as you might turn carefully a rock,

calm a child.

Hope morphine rubs off

these fingers

stained like cigarettes.

The air lacks anodyne,

it swallows like raw bread,

cold water.

Where is He?

There is nothing taking over

it’s still you and your hand -

shaking, alone.

Perhaps metamorphosis

resides in aftermath.

The guilt and revulsion distancing,

a breach of nature so contradictory

it writes off the logic of its origin,

uproots the self: demands change.

Do you

decline?

There is no latitude here.

No margin but his eye and hand.

And the garden is closed by fire.

~

You wake up as it starts to rain.

Cauterise the night with a shower. Extra hot, till the glass steams over and you stand there, cooling. You heard about a sauna competition on the news, a Russian guy who stayed in for four hours and died. Like to think it was a hero’s death. His friends carrying the coffin home, and offering sad let’s-get-through-this jokes. It’s nice, how a tragedy can be hoisted and held aloft by its victims; adopted in its own way.

The towel is baked stiff from the sun, and catches like sandpaper as you dry off.

~

Good Soil

Seeds are planted,

then watched –

backs bent straight against the

scaffolding of fathers.

They cling like vines

so they too, might flower their own:

blossom like scripture from their tongue

a seed

and, silhouetted in rows; grape-red and

the fixture of crosses in the sun

become a simulacrum of god.

There is order:

the thick gloved gardener

curbs pestilence with a clip

occasionally, an unruly offshoot

lest it metastasise.

Generations of fathers

distil each cycle,

mortal from the venial -

Wind themselves tighter around

their staves of wood:

calcify it with their bones,

so any breach of form

cannot receive light.

~

Rite Two

Sex

“*Everything in the world is about sex…”*

* *Oscar Wilde*

You wake after only a few of hours sleep, and claim the unsigned space of night. Chitin flakes a path down the hall, to guide your feet, your moth-intent, white transfixion.

You arrive and watch the computer bear its slow load in front of you. Pixels marble themselves hard and dead, sunspots lying witness to - and products of - your repetition. Your mouse clicks render like nail clippings in the dark.

FIND SEXY SINGLES NEAR YOU

You click away the banner – it sees you with its urgency. Its sudden complicity, and heat-seeking intensity flush through your distal self.

Your eyes draw ravens across the page to establish their curatorship. Thumbnails solicit with their pink corners, potential energy begging just one quick click, your kinetic release.

A Schrödinger's erotics; the heat unclear till the opening.

Look through peep-holes until you find some foreign corner to consume; a silent film that draws out your sameness until it sweats in contact - sticky flesh in cold air held by nothing. The bodies slip between images, afterimages - semaphore thirst. Letters flicker at your pulse and you can feel theirs on the other side.

You rise and project yourself up to the screen – a sudden impulse of exposure:

you are: fucking howling slipping tongue ear drugged salt-lick, God-like:

Apotheosis.

The screen clears,

you clear,

tabula rasa.

You grieve: the empty:

~

“Mate – if a key opens every lock it’s a master key. If a lock is opened by any key, it’s a shitty lock.”

“Ha. What’s Natalie then? Bit of a shit one?”

“Oi shut up about my girlfriend mate, you couldn’t give her the ring around anyway. You’re still bitter cause she turned you down at that party two years ago.”

“It’s true Stevo!”

“Awww, poor Stevo!”

Double over in laughter - they’re all walking along the road like they own this piece of land, expansive gestures like galahs and scuffing their shoes, kicking pavement.

He huffs, his bird track-line moves away from the group a little. “Mate, she’s not your girlfriend! You’ve been over for months.”

The hanger-on pipes up: “She’s with Pat, Jord said he saw them macking down the gully near the school.”

Easy words float in the buoyancy of the group, and set up a patter along the slack-jaw line of shops. A man trajectories his way over.

“Morning sir – hope the boys haven’t been giving you too much trouble at school.”

“Hilarious. Why aren’t all of you in class?”

Not even a muscle flinches among them. Keep your cool.

“We’ll be there in a second sir.”

“Yeah we’re there right now sir.”

“I’m sitting in Geography sir. What are you talking about?”

He’s used to this, grey-eyed man has been round the school for more years than anyone can remember and quicker than they account him.

“Well son, I’ll be calling your father.”

“Might as well skip the bullshit and call straight to the pub then.”

They acknowledge your victory with a grin.

“You coming tonight? Laura will be.”

“Mhhm.”

“Course you are.”

~

Sound spills from a set of speakers and mixes synesthetic with a fire that builds into the sky. You can feel your face suffuse pink from the heat and beer, and it grows redder in that knowledge.

Laura verses the circumference of the fire in a slow samba. She has girlish hips though, and the sensual dance sits half-right on her colt body. Still, her faint sweat carries as she comes up to you – the beer melting her hip movements mesmerising, painting her into a fantasy.

She revolves around your centre. Takes your hands and puts them on her waist, sways a little.

She laughs – depressurising – and sits on a rock. Your pulse subsides.

“You staying the night?”

“Why do you wanna know?”

Her words slip coyly, noose-like.

“Beats driving back drunk.”

She laughs, wild and uncaring.

“Who says I’m getting drunk?”

You smirk and chuck her a Tooheys. And another, till the conversation fades incontinent, and your connection rubs raw to a gaze.

The bolt strikes clean through her skull.

Hungry animal you become, but still so unsure of yourself, what do you do with your mouth, your hands? She is out of it, stoned as a cucumber. Pushes you away when you go for her undies but you kiss her some more and the next time she doesn’t offer up as much resistance. Besides, you know, it’s just a known fact – if she didn’t want to get with you she never would have started this. You’re away from the fire now, brought your swag down and she said she was cold; that was the bracken, the crackling dry leaves of it.

She climbs out some time after you fall asleep.

~

In a short skirt like summer

her breath eclipses

and shears

words.

She is bare and

tasteless.

You slide her between teeth:

pomegranate seed.

Her meniscus holds, eludes your

molar.

She catches on your tongue,

vivid

subverted.

Her knees: enamelled

rise like spiders

scramble fruitless,

slow

the swag has no purchase.

Her legs form a coathanger: moon white

and clatter wretched

on your back, your belt-buckle.

She rolls, listless foam on your

pulse.

Spits seaweed onto the pillow.

It is dark,

her small cries disembody themselves

and wane irregular into a pillow.

Her eyes meet her hand

and retain the contact.

It is over quickly -

He spends himself,

claims space inside.

The night will certify itself,

sublimate

be heralded.

No record but

your grin,

infinitive self.

her

quiet throat.

*~*

A girl swallows a pill in a bathroom and contains herself in the chipped linoleum: in vitro. Chemicals unlace her lining and she waits for it to exit. She is not wearing mascara, but she stands and watches her face spoil itself; spit and salt wet run through its folds. She turns on the shower to mask the sound.

*“…except sex. Sex is about power.”*

Rite Three

Fatherhood

*Strangest of all,*

*how the deeper he recedes into the grave*

*the more I see myself*

*as just one more of all the little men*

*who creep through life*

*not knee-high to this long-dead god.*

* *Ian Mudie, ‘My father began as a God’*

Primacy

Smoked liquor suits:

a rifling pinstripe to keep true

the black clack shoe –

smacking ivory,

clean as teeth

and the meat breath that lingers

as you pass through.

The smoke warning

flares:

iris, nose, vein,

burnt Magnesium eye.

It dilates, self-eclipsing

and fattens your gaze,

so it might be cast –

slickened and heady,

to hook her fish-eye,

her fish-lip,

wordless against the opium whites.

Trace the cat,

arched asinine.

Its wet purr

steams off your bull lips,

pluming high and grey

hookah heartbeats

into the night.

~

Midday sun resins the sky. Light falls thick and amber into the marquee. It strikes clean off the afternoon like the bells of a church, pealing stark over cutlery and white tablecloth. The sun diverts gaze in a kind of divine refraction.

The light is viscous and washes oily over skin, like a baptism. As the afternoon wears on, it dims against the grass and skin and white tarpaulin; becomes familiar with its hosts, and tempers its heat. Like how the majesty of stained glass can be thawed in a prayer. Dissolved in the smoke of faith and pooled in cupped hands. Kept, simmering, as your small fire.

You see her dashing to the bathroom. She’s hiked up her dress and awkwardly plants her feet in high heels, like a cassowary. Isn’t it bad luck to see her before the ceremony? You laugh.

Sophia.

Your vows are crisp. You take hers and suck them round your mouth, submitted and plump and wet. Closed kiss.

You turn and watch white balloons lift and become stuck in a tree, each pressing for the sun. People turn to watch. Light enamels their hair and picks it up in the wind – like rows and rows of fairy floss guests, sticky and dissolving in the afternoon. They meet your eyes and soften like salt on your tongue.

Sure pink galahs leave the trees, the day buys itself into your memories twenty years ahead –you wonder if you’ve arrived.

~

Months later: sun strikes through and doesn’t reach the bottom of the ravine, buildings are tall angling things, so it’s just a set of countless mirrors reflecting the one sun and dazzling through its random split lines.

The sun lands sharp, chord-like over your apartment walls, across the tablecloth. Its panels seem to be demanding. Your mouth curls down at the black coffee, you are late, you don’t know what it’s asking of you and her eyes don’t touch yours over your cereal bowls.

“We have to go, honey. We’ve been avoiding it for months.”

“I know.”

**~**

The waiting room is bleached white and stinks of failed surgery. Scented air plumes shamelessly from the receptionist’s desk. Sicilian Pine Forest.

In a corner of the room, the white plasterboard gives way to pink, with rows of baby photos stuck up in celebration. Like brace-less kids smiling in an orthodontist. They could be yours with only five easy instalments.

A dinosaur has been discarded mid-attack, hovering beside a couple smiling in a red convertible. A girl climbs over and continues the scene. A clumsy line of imagination that continues on between each child – like a patchwork. A narrative suspended and picked up, with a tiny umbilical connecting through each scene.

The door swings clean open.

“Mr. and Mrs. Harris?”

~

We define places by images and characters. When you think of a friend – someone you know well – you invoke them in a few select memories. Maybe a laugh, the way they frown over a problem, or a conspiratorial smile they give before a joke. In the same way, we come to delineate places within our mind. An abortion clinic is marked by protests. The hot shame and fear of a girl ducking inside – shadowed by a boyfriend, or sympathetic father. A funeral is bitter and sweet. Gracious, and a place where departures from grace are forgiven. Cast with muted clothing under a muted sky, and replete with a murder of crows lined like apostles on a branch. As iconography, this imagery becomes irreducible – and yet, decoupled from its ambivalences. Things only go down like this in the Great Imaginary.

A fertility clinic is abbreviated in the hands of a couple wrung together.

You are now a bone of truth sinewed in cliché. It almost makes you laugh – but you can’t - have to keep up illusions of the role. Grim smile, please, and squeeze her hand reassuringly for good measure.

The doctor is infuriatingly gracious to you both. You know she has felt the texture of this scene before, and understands its coarseness. She hands you a sheet of paper; an analysis of your sperm. Hormones are perfectly fine - but something about them not swimming well, the words “sperm agglutination”, “antibodies” and treatments and IVF courses and their wonderful shiny success rates. There is still space on the wall outside.

Some part of you reels as though car salesmanship was occurring. Other parts of you reel in the fingers of your failure. Sophia’s hand never leaves yours – she cradles the report in the loop of your arms, and reads its round absence; the white space on the page that imparts more than its lining.

You drive the way back to the apartment. The traffic pulls you into its rhythm, its symbols of red and green that are subconsciously registered, and effortlessly guide your place. It is in this river of subsisting consciousness that subliminal thoughts assemble, quietly. They rouse, and agitate, and plot their slow percolation into your thoughts.

And unadmitted, growing from the melanoma, is the knowledge that you’d prefer if it was her who was broken.

You tighten your grip on the wheel until your impulses pool and become indistinct from the ebb of cars. So each thought is sublimated, seamlessly rendered in a chorus of pistons and fire and steel movement.

Would it be better if you never wanted kids? Never knew? Went about thinking that you *could*, but you chose not to. There’s some semblance of control in that, at least.

You remember being overcome one morning, seeing the receding edges of your hair. There was less resistance as you washed it, strands came off in your hands. And so you scraped and tore at your scalp till it was in patches. You walked to the sink, picked up a razor and shaved it bare. And as the mirror un-steamed to reveal the raw moon of your head, an elation came over you. There was something carnally liberating about the act – the flaunting of what was feared. In the light of the bathroom, you claimed a freedom in your fist and held on. You indulged it meticulously, each day after – the ritual lather and shave expunging: your morning baptism. The film of aftershave stinging vital, like breathing after chewing gum.

So there is something. To do, that is. There must be something. This is the allure of prayer – to rattle off pleas to some higher power, absolve yourself of the burden of a solution. To rend open your chest and fashion a child from your rib.

These varicose thoughts clot in your brain and stake territory.

Ricochet off an apartment foyer, and bed.

I am Adam’s clenched tongue *- ich, ich.*

Sleep.

**~**

Lilies of the Nile grow from the soil, bruised purple and wet up to the sky. Children nearby pull them up by their roots, and wave their clumping snakes of weeds, like swords. Each step allows their feet to sink deliciously into mud, creaming up their toes. Angular laughter churns in the air. They fall into the river – some jump, some just to join – and now all the children lie, basketless, in the rushes.

Women are bathing in stone archways. They slip lemon legs out of their clothes, and dive into the water. They swim sideways, leisurely, like long spiders or languid weeds. Talking softly and occasionally - words that linger like dragonflies and are digested, turned over their reserved spaces in the air. Sweat and fruit combine into a musk in the air, equal part foreign and infant, lover and maternal. A woman breastfeeds her child, hugs him to her chest like a tumour. Her teratoma. He rises and falls with cotton breaths, his cat tongue wedged between oyster-edge gums.

A ribbon of water rises clear off the sea and moves toward the shoreline. Its belly is dark and glossy whale-flesh. It thickens into a curling finger of God as the women turn their heads in spectacular Greek tragedy. The finger conducts them like heroin. It teases its needle head across their bare eyes; they are drugged in its gaze. Heroines? They clutch their chests, carnival clown mouths open and swallowing without consent. The woman drops her child.

Osiris! Osiris! A tsunami is coming; giant wave; Mother. They run as pawns. All but the woman - her breast is leaking milk. She is looking for her baby, she is frantic – they all are. White pawns are on the white squares. The Queen moves. She, grand. “Queen to E7.” Some slip urgently into the cycles of her belly, others have their heads dashed against squares. She is pregnant with them all, her screaming larvae and blood red water. Jonas. Mate.

Or is she the Frog? Tiddalik, watery toad. Does it really matter? Some deity is angry, she cannot bear.

Red suffuses the light of your imagined Egypt, stolen children.

You wake up, you have woken. The bodies are washed into the soil like fish, fertilising. The baby grows a plum tree over time – you think forty years – it goes through cycles of fruit and flower and only ever grows higher. Tall and laden with treacle-flesh fruit.

That wave was the last water fed to the city. Thirst sets in like a high; rabid and bone at first. Then the frenzy weans, and panic grips the city like livestock. Veins stand out as maps and worm their way off their hosts, sourcing water.

The temples reflect the heart of the city at this time.

On the first day, they pleaded a desperate eloquence to their Gods. They sent a priest in robes and jewellery to lay a basket as sacrifice. It was filled with bread and fish and quails and rosemary, and doused in water and oils.

On the second day, the whole city came in and lay in front of the statues. Their chants rose soporific and ground chalk echoes against the walls.

On the third day, the Pharaoh came in a chariot to the doors of the temple, and told his priests to wait outside. He walked in alone, lay down his flail and sceptre and drank the fouled water from the bowl.

By the fourth day, most of the city was dead. The drought had reduced it like a broth, in emulsifying heat. The streets stained hard against orange-peeled dehydration, the people heaved in abjection, skin growing more pitted and shrunken. Some men and women were still alive, and cut their names into clay walls. Immortalising, in some way. Like Pompeii women frozen in their last posture of prayer, the moment preserved in ash. Or how a father might live on in his son, in a basket of weeds on a river.

It would be fitting – plausible, even, for a dream – to say that the Pharaoh stayed, dying with his land as it shrivelled in the emaciating heat. But he did not. It would be equally expected to say that the Gods finally relented and fed life back into the city, at the eleventh hour, and that this purging had rid the city of the wicked – those who were too thirsty. This, too, did not happen.

Instead, the Pharaoh found a wild horse that had crossed from the desert into the city, and fled on its back into the sands. He did not meet the eyes of his remaining few citizens as he crossed out through the city’s streets, still in his triumphant gowns.

Growing tired after a few hours of riding, he tore strips off his robes and tied himself onto the horse’s back. He nestled into the brush of its neck and fell asleep.

He woke up drenched in cool desert rain. Water filmed the dunes like a skin of coffee, steaming up in some great offering of incense. He didn’t laugh, or regress into the gratitude of men who had held hope. He cupped his hands and drank, over and over until his mouth was wet and his skin rehydrated like dry fruit.

A wicker basket lies dry

at the bottom of a lake.

~

Leaves unfurl hurriedly in your garden. Seasons hit, deep, and royals in the deck ask you a question you aren’t sure of. The same symbols run quickly over your family home, marking time: red leaves and pumpkins, black-fingered trees, asparagus heads spearing up in the field behind your lot, then dry sun. Shadows cross a window. Together you lie in bed as if the sun has cored you both and left you gasping and brown; each act less purposeful than the last.

~

Knowledge

Moth night,warm

and plump with moon.

Pudding grass

spills possums and rain.

Jacaranda flowers burst milk underfoot

suckling.

Alleys grow in

on them-

selves, moss and dark wet.

Bacteria life festers

under streetlamp wounds of light,

and flickers stilted

seductive –

French neo-noir at two a.m.

Malt light, silk

from a reading lamp.

Your burning bush.

It whispers and smokes

your thoughts

out: bees from a hive.

Limns their form in dark,

and coils through a cracked window

to suffuse the city below.

Lamp wanes on empty wax:

you sleep.

The room you painted

baby blue

sits cool and airy,

its rich sea-monster pattern

foreign without the fantasy.

God’s radio turns to static,

crickets.

Pharaoh cotton sheets catch

like locusts on grain:

insomniac crickets.

Fig flesh pulls away to reveal

its pit

shrunken salt eye.

Senses impart:

your father’s breath on the end

of the phone, resigning.

Her hands, marble soft on yours

midwife your grief.

Michelangelo;

a finger of wood reaches down,

you lunge for the apple on its end.

You manage

a wisp of its skin.

Knowledge sits poison in your mouth.